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AUTHOR Clyde, Margaret
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ABSTRACT

This paper elaborates on a series of quotations to illustrate major influences in children's language development. The first quotation, from Lilian G. Katz (1988), suggests that what children like is not necessarily developmentally appropriate for them. This idea can be applied to the development of language competence. In the second quotation, Toni G. Cross notes that a loss of language may occur in preschool settings in which the teacher tends towards a dominant conversational style. Discussion of this quotation addresses studies that suggest that mothers' conversational style is more positive than preschool teachers'. In the third quotation, Margaret Clyde (1990) proposes that learning environments need to be embedded in contexts that are meaningful to children. The fourth quotation, from Katz (1989), stresses the value of three functions of language: communication, expression, and reasoning. In the fifth quotation, also from Katz (1989), it is noted that spontaneous play and project work are closely intertwined and occur side by side. The project approach is discussed. It is maintained that appropriate intervention by teachers and caregivers involves encouragement; direction, when necessary; and modeling. The final quotation, from Amy Sheldon (1990), maintains that "our language reflects sexist, male-centred attitudes that perpetuate the...marginalization...of female experience." A bibliography of 14 items is provided. (BC)

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TO TALK OR NOT TO TALK: THAT IS THE QUESTION

Paper presented at the Northern Territory
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Margaret Clyde
Principal Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies
School of Early Childhood Studies
University of Melbourne

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Millions of children around the world begin to speak their mother tongue - or tongues - each year without any formal instruction. In the natural course of events we try to offer young children rich, stimulating opportunities to learn their mother tongue in their own home and community. According to Marie Clay, the usual components of a young child's life are conducive to language learning and this natural language learning is infinitely more effective than any special programs we have been able to produce. When we provide opportunities for children to spend time in a child care centre or a preschool we do so in the knowledge that we have definitely changed their "natural" environment, and as a result, there will be some gains in terms of the richness of experience we offer them and at the same time there will be some losses in regard to language experiences.

In the light of Clay's assertions, we need to look at the contemporary view of the way in which teachers and caregivers respond to this win-lose situation for young children's language. The following is a long quote from a chapter by Parsons and Clyde in a recently published book entitled Planning for Thinkers and Learners: The Early Years.

> "All teachers and caregivers accept that oral language is an important part of children's development. Teachers and caregivers know about language acquisition and have an understanding of how to support and facilitate language development in young children.
>
> They acknowledge that children are pre-disposed to learning oral language and respond to this in a number of ways. For instance they talk to children, they include children in a variety of conversations, they use mature speech and they view children as competent language learners. They accept children's responses and utterances as 'talk'. While they accept children's talk as if they understand it, they frequently elaborate on the response providing the opportunity for the child to learn more complex sentence structure and vocabulary. In addition they understand the importance of providing a language model for children, they provide opportunities for children to hear language as well as use language. They are aware of the importance of listening to children and by doing this they reinforce the relationship between listening and talking. Teachers and caregivers also act as models for parents when they do these things.
>
> Teachers and caregivers arrange the learning environment in such a way that the child has ample opportunity to talk and listen to adults, peers and electronic media. The environment provides stimulus for children's talk - picture books, living things and a variety of experiences in art, science, music, movement and mathematics, these all offer opportunities for children to use, practise and extend their oral language.
>
> In addition specific areas such as the home corner, blocks, sand and water areas, cooking and woodwork, promote further opportunities for talking and listening.
>
> The skilful teacher and caregiver takes every opportunity to capitalise on these

experiences so that oral language becomes an integral part of the total program.

In the field of literature itself the teacher or caregiver makes conscious choices about relevant resources and appropriate learning experiences. For instance, story reading to an entire group of 25 children is a time-honoured custom but its usefulness is now being questioned in terms of various characteristics of the book including story line and format, lay out and usefulness of illustrations.

Teachers and caregivers offer children choices within a stimulating but secure environment. In this kind of environment children have the freedom to use the materials in ways which reflect the nature and functions of the materials. For example they expect children in the block corner to behave like block builders, children working at the easels to behave like painters, children in the home corner to assume roles of caregivers, doctors, shopkeepers, children at the woodwork bench to act as carpenters. While the products may not resemble closely that of their adult counterparts, teachers and caregivers accept and value these immature, unsophisticated versions of the real thing. At this stage caregivers and teachers acknowledge that the processes involved are the important components of the experience and are quick to share this knowledge with anxious parents."

(Parsons and Clyde, 1988: 12-13)

No one could disagree with these statements but they fail to explain fully the real role of teachers and caregivers in the process of enhancing young children's communication skills; they do not alert readers or listeners to consider when - and how - teachers and caregivers should operate in order to fulfil this role; "to talk or not to talk" is really the most pressing concern of professionals who work with young children.

If you think that my title has a somewhat familiar ring it is a dreadful parody of one of William Shakespeare's most famous lines from Hamlet, but in keeping with this analogy I will use six quotations to try to key us in to the major influences on children's language development in those critical formative years. Let's begin with a quote from Lillian Katz (1988):

"Because young children are trusting and eager to please their teachers, they willingly do almost any task assigned to them... However, children's enjoyment of an activity is never a sufficient criterion for its inclusion. Young children enjoy junk food, television shows of doubtful value and war toys. That does not qualify these items as developmentally appropriate for or potentially beneficial to them."

(Katz, 1988: 11)

Young children are exposed to language in many forms (some of which they could do without such as the slick New York slang used by the teenage mutant Ninja turtles), but the development of language competence requires that children need to be engaged in meaningful conversation rather than being passively exposed to language by listening to stories, poetry, films or other talking around them.

Conversations with adults and other children have the potential to strengthen all the competencies involved in communication, namely, self expression, verbal reasoning and communicating with others. However it should be realised that it takes about seven years for children to develop and acquire basic conversational skills. (Katz, 1988:25) By "basic conversation skills" I am not referring to those ghastly "Show and Tell" or "News Times" we all endured at a tender age in which we had to struggle to conjure up a newsworthy item for our uninterested peers, who were learning to "tune out" rather than to listen.

At first glance a seven year period of grace in which to assist children to achieve what Clay has described as a natural phenomenon seems to be overgenerous but adverse conditions can in fact mitigate against language acquisition and development and in fact Martlew (1980) has suggested that children's language decreases when adults merely adopt a caretaker role. Unfortunately other inappropriate techniques on the part of the teacher or caregiver can also produce the same result, which leads one on to my second quote from Cross (1989):

> "There may be a nett loss (of language) in the preschool setting, possibly associated with the teachers' tendency towards a 'dominant' conversational style in the classroom."
>
> (Cross, 1989: 142-3)

Because the acquisition of language is seen to be one of the most important achievements of the preschool age child, many researchers in recent years have placed a strong emphasis on the interpersonal context in which this language acquisition takes place. There is a great deal of literature which describes the language and interactions of parents and young children in general, and in particular the way in which parents modify their language when talking with young children, as in "can baby see the moo cow?" and the manner in which their modifications can hinder or accelerate their children's language.

Over the past fifteen years or so there has been an increased interest in the contribution of the preschool program in the young child's acquisition of language, and the complexity of that language. Prior to that time it was taken for granted that preschool settings were very similar to the child's home environment, and in fact, it was claimed by some that the kindergarten was a continuation of the "good home" so it was deemed to be unnecessary to investigate the two settings separately. However we all know that preschools and child care centres differ from the home in a number of ways that could influence the development of language; the home may have one or two children with whom the adult interacts at any one time; whereas the centre could have up to twenty or more children demanding the attention of the adult at any one time; the roles of parents and teachers or caregivers are perceived to be different while the centre usually operates around a more fixed schedule than would operate in a home. The majority of the data gathered so far tends to suggest that the home is the more positive environment for the development of the young child's language. The most damning of the data has been the work of Tizard and Hughes, Young Children Learning (1984), who indicated children talked less in the preschool setting than at home, that at preschool they had fewer conversations overall and had fewer opportunities to

"hold the floor" or to initiate conversations with adults, while children at preschool tended to respond to questions less often, and that when they did respond, their replies were less elaborate.

Here is a typical example of preschool conversation - a girl named Jane, who used to play Knockout Whist (a card game) with her mother; a game involving the ability to count, to understand which suit is "trumps" and to realise that aces are the best):

Jane:	Can you cut that in half? Cut it in half?
T :	What would you like me to do it with?
J :	Scissors
T :	With the scissors .. where do you want me to cut it?
T :	Show me again 'cause I don't quite know where the cut's got to go. How many pieces have you got now?
J :	(no reply)
T :	How many have you got?
J :	(no reply)
T :	How many pieces of paper have you got?
J :	Two
T :	What have I cut it in?
J :	(no reply)

This conversation proceeded until another child responded "two" and the teacher finally told Jane that she had cut the paper in half.

The teacher in question was so focussed on the answer she wanted that she appeared to reject other perfectly good responses. The child in fact knew the answer, because she asked initially for the teacher to cut the paper in half, but she may have become so inhibited or confused by the questioning that she is unable to respond on cue. This does not do a lot for Jane's self concept or her limited knowledge of the world. Now let's look at Jane playing Knockout Whist with her mother.

Mum :	You have to call (i.e. name trumps)
Jane :	Ooh, I got a good hand here again but I can help it. I got two aces here
Mum :	You shouldn't tell me what you got, go on, call trumps.
Jane :	I call heart, I not putting a heart down
Mum :	Hearts. That's my trick that's yours.
Jane :	No diamonds.
Mum :	Oh you've changed your mind. So how many (tricks) have you got?
Jane :	Three
Mum :	And I've got how many?
Jane :	Two, and how many did I have

etc. etc.

And so the controversy continues. A number of studies have been carried out in Melbourne which look at language interaction between preschoolers and parents and preschoolers and teachers. One of the earliest was carried out by Coleman,

Perry and Cross (1982), looking at the language interaction and acquisition in six "middle class" Melbourne kindergartens. Results indicated that the teachers' language was devoted to 63% conversation with the children and 37% on "nonconversation" items such as issuing orders, disciplining children and the like, whereas the children used language 91% of the time in conversations and 8% in nonconversations episodes. The teachers initiated 68% of the utterances while the children initiated 30% of the conversations. Predictably the mean length of the teachers' utterances was, on average, the same when talking to children or other adults, but it was larger than that of the children.

A follow up study by Cross and Horsborough (1986) extended the 1982 study to include twenty four preschools, half of which were in lower socio-economic level areas of Melbourne.

It was confirmed that the preschool teachers talk in a more complex way to children than their mothers do; the length of the mothers' and children's utterances were about the same, whereas teachers' utterances were longer thus indicating that the teachers' language is less sensitively tuned to child language.

The comparisons also revealed that mothers talked less to their children than did the teachers, whereas the children talked less to the teachers than to their mothers. In other words there was a tendency for the teachers to dominate the conversations and to be less sensitive to the children's utterances. Both the amount and complexity of language of the high SES group and the low SES group did not improve throughout the year at preschool; the children became less talkative with the teacher as the year progressed, even in one to one situations.

Cross (1989) has suggested that the mothers, by contrast to the teachers, have a more positive conversational style, in that they permit their children to take a leading role in their conversations, to encourage them to initiate conversations, and be less inhibiting in their conversational style.

However the teachers' more demanding, less adjusting style of language appears to force the children in their care to use language which results in greater complexity and length of sentences - that is, when the children do speak.

Obviously, there is enough conflicting data here to make it obvious why there is so much controversy and conjecture over the relative roles of parents and teachers in the language development of the young child. It is probably wise not to try to make simplistic generalisations about the role of each adult in the child's language development. However, there is the concern that teachers do appear to be the dominant persons in any conversations with young children, that they talk more than mothers, and, as a result children talk less, in conversations with teachers.

In case any caregivers in the audience are basking in the reflected glory of not having been included in the negative comments on teachers' contributions to the language development of young children, let me report very briefly on a study by Honig and Wittmer (1982) on the kinds of questions which toddler caregivers asked of one hundred two and three year old children attending child care centres in the USA. The study reported that 81% of the time individual toddlers were asked

true questions, that is, questions designed to elicit information. Other questions, such as "Why don't you finish your peas before they get cold?" or "Will you pick up the blocks" are really requests and are labelled as non-true questions. Requests of this kind took up 15% of the questions asked, while discipline reproofs constituted almost 4% of the questions. Praise did not appear in question form. Of all the true questions asked of toddlers, 80% were convergent questions which required only a yes/no response, while 20% allowed for more than one correct answer. Fewer than 1% of the caregivers' questions offered toddlers a choice. While you can argue that toddlers sometimes become phased out by too much choice, it is difficult to support the fact that only 18% of the caregivers' questions referred to other people's feelings or wishes yet if we consider that the rudiments of prosocial behaviour and role-taking skills are an integral part of the toddler curriculum then these results are cause for consideration. A further area of concern revolved around sex differences in the questions; boys were asked almost half as many questions relating to the feelings of others and girls were asked significantly more personal-feeling questions than the boys. This is one of the ways in which sex-stereotyping can be promoted; it could be argued that the girls are being socialised to respond to more routine and safe questions and to act on requests than are the boys, whose questions require them to respond to open-ended questions which require cognitive restructurings in which children offer a point of view such as "What do we have to do to keep our guinea pigs happy and safe and comfortable?"

Tennant, McNaughton and Glynn (1988) have reported on a fascinating study carried out in a child care centre in New Zealand. Four toddlers aged 20-23 months were observed with their trained primary caregiver for some weeks and during this time no changes were recorded in the toddlers' language patterns. However the caregiver received specific training in ways to engage young children in responsive conversations and the subsequent caregiver-toddler conversations showed an increase in both frequency and quality which reflected accelerated trends in the children's acquiring language. A secondary result of the research indicated that there has to be an interactive, stimulating environment for the process to be successful. The caregiver in question was trained to answer the toddlers' questions and add extra information about topics which were of interest to the children; this in turn led to longer and more frequent conversations in which the toddlers made use of new words and phrases. As the conversations increased the caregiver realised that she was learning more about the toddlers' language skills and their knowledge of the world and this assisted her with the responsive conversations. It should be noted however, that in order to achieve this kind of result, the centre must demonstrate three characteristics; firstly, a variety of materials, many of which are open ended; secondly, caregivers who can provide a responsive feedback in their interaction with children; and thirdly, an adult/child ratio and program which provide time, which is so necessary in many child-initiated interactions.

So far so good; I have tried to alert both teachers and caregivers to the pitfalls of over assertive and domineering behaviour in the centre, perhaps it is time to offer a third quote. This is one of my own, but it is only an amalgam of many, many researchers and educators, namely :

> "The learning environment needs to be embedded in contexts of great meaning to the child."
>
> (Clyde, 1990:6)

The learning environment needs to be embedded in contexts of great meaning to the child. The role of the child care centre or kindergarten is to "foster, harness and satisfy the interest and curiosity which children show at home". (Tizard and Hughes, 1984:261)

An environment is required which will allow the "puzzling mind" to flourish, and which will help young children to enhance their knowledge and skills, particularly their communication skills. According to Tizard and Hughes, this would necessitate a change in the entire priorities of the centre; instead of fostering spontaneous play and devising creative ways for the children to use materials, and then on questioning the children about their play, the caregiver or teacher would have to allocate a high priority to deliberately widening the child's horizons, in extending their general knowledge and on listening to the children talk. Tizard and Hughes suggest that as most of the intellectually stimulating conversations occurred in the home during periods of relative leisure or tete-a-tete meals rather than when a child was busy at an activity that centres should do away with some of the activities at which children are "busy" and that staff should spend more time in the one place so that conversations can occur naturally.

These "naturally-occurring conversations" I have just mentioned may free wheel over a number of areas, including the neighbours, money (or lack of it), electric lights, God, the death of pets, doctors and the latest tram strike. Tizard and Hughes suggest that caregivers and teachers need to urgently revise and update their ideas about what young children can understand and provide them with a great deal more general knowledge.

My fourth quote serves to link up this awareness of the broad brush perspectives which young children have of their world, and the need to match these interests with the opportunity to develop all the basic functions of language. This is a second quote from Katz (1989):

> "Virtually everyone concerned with young children's learning recognises that early childhood is a critical period in the development of communicative competence. Communicative competence includes complex knowledge as well as skills. Contemporary research indicates that all three basic functions of language, namely, communication, expression and reasoning, are enhanced when children engage in conversation."
>
> (Katz, 1989:28)

Young children are intensely interested in the people and things in their environment and they work very hard at understanding their experiences and make sense of them in spite of their limited repertoire of experiences. Even when young children are asked bizarre questions such as "Is milk bigger than water?" or "Is red heavier than yellow?" Hughes and Grieve (1983) reported that young children treated these questions seriously and tried to respond sensibly, e.g. "Milk is bigger (than water) because it's got a colour" and "Red is heavier than yellow because there's water in it". We all have a similar list of anecdotes of young children obviously making every effort to understand their environment. While it can be

argued that parents do contribute, both informally and spontaneously, to expanding the understanding of young children, teachers and caregivers are the adults who deliberately undertake this role at a critical time in the young child's intellectual development. Because young children require direct first hand experiences, as opposed to text books and formal instruction, they need opportunities to explore and act out familiar events such as going shopping, eating breakfast and so on and in this way they are discovering what is universal in these activities, e.g. paying the bill, bringing home the shopping, and what is idiosyncratic, e.g. what you buy when you shop, how you get to the shops. Katz (1989) argues that projects are an ideal way to introduce new information on known topics to young children and assist them to extend their knowledge in familiar, and not so familiar areas.

Recent research indicates that young children's communicative competence can be enhanced by working in small group projects which provide a potentially rich environment for conversation between children and between the adults and the children. The project also provides the adult with the opportunity to ask solicitous questions, as opposed to interrogatory questions. The most common kind of questions asked by teachers and caregivers is interrogatory questions such as: "What colour is your shirt?" or "How did those fish yet in the tank?" (to which one child responded: "Have you forgotten already?") In an interrogatory question the adult invariably knows the answer and those of you who work with aboriginal children would know that it is perceived as insulting to be asked such a question. Young children can feel intimidated or even threatened by such a question, particularly if they believe the adult knows the answer. A better kind of question would be a soliciting question, which is designed to encourage young children to provide answers the adult does not already have, e.g. "Is that colour shirt one of your favourites?" or "Do you particularly like the colour blue?" The young child may then respond in a conversational, rather than an inhibitory manner.

This notion of Projects does not, in any way, preclude the teacher or caregiver planning for and encouraging other components of socio-dramatic play. Socio-dramatic play is an area of great interest to most early childhood workers and it involves two or more children voluntarily assuming certain roles and engaging in verbal communication during the activity. True socio-dramatic play develops around the age of 3 and gradually fades away about the age of 6 or 7 when children become more interested in games with rules. Talking has a major role in socio-dramatic play as the participants are involved in planning, developing and maintaining the play. During this play children often "try out" extremely complicated grammatical and pragmatic forms of speech for the first time. The initial work of Smilansky with disadvantaged children who were not good at "playing" and whose language was not as rich as that of middle class "players" has been followed up by other researchers, including Jurkovic (1978) who found that among the disadvantaged children the "good players" were significantly more verbal during play. It would appear that as socio-dramatic play has been characterised by complex activities that the complexity of the play is directly related to language competency, irrespective of the abilities of the young children involved. It follows then that a program for young children which optimises spontaneous socio-dramatic play opportunities of this kind could enhance language competency. It follows also that these "play opportunities" are not perceived as provided merely if the children have access to a Home Corner. The activities must capture the interest of, "and

involve", as many children as possible while at the same time provide for an increase in language and cognitive development through a rich language stimulation.

Topics and themes need to be developed through trips, stories, visitors, etc. to establish a shared background of knowledge for all the children, together with what Levy et al (1986) describe as a "wealth of intriguing props", as well as ample time and large amounts of space.

The final ingredient is appropriate caregiver/teacher intervention through encouragement, direction when necessary and modelling. Lillian Katz has expanded on this process in her book Engaging Children's Minds: The Project Approach (1989). In this book Katz attempts to outline the concept of the Project approach, the experiences of the children and the dual relationship of action and language development, i.e. the influence of language on the project, together with the development of language through the medium of the project.

It is probably timely to intercede with another quote in case listeners are concerned that Project work will preclude any opportunities for spontaneous play:

> "During the preschool years, spontaneous play and project work are closely intertwined and occur side by side."
>
> (Katz, 1989:15)

Firstly Katz attempts to outline the concept of the Project Approach as contrasted with spontaneous play. A project will involve a number of children exploring a topic or theme in depth for a period of days or weeks, depending on the children's level of development and the nature of the topic. The project is also different from spontaneous play in that it involves the children in advanced planning and in engaging in activities which could carry over for several days or even a few weeks. All the planning and enacting will involve language of some kind - expressive, communicative and reasoning.

The group size and composition can vary over the course of the project also; with preschool age children the group will probably be small.

The approach basically provides the children with an opportunity to interact with other children and adults and with things in the environment. The child makes the choice about what tasks are to be carried out and may choose experiences that stretch their existing skills or reflect their particular level of development, i.e. they select activities which will provide appropriate "levels of challenge".

> "A sufficient variety of activities and tasks should be available so that some can be done routinely, some in a free-wheeling fashion, and others to stimulate new learning."
>
> (Katz, 1989: 13)

> "In project work, children are seen as already having proficiencies and capabilities and should be encouraged to apply them in meaningful contexts ... the tasks in project work are undertaken in a context that makes sense to

the children - what Donaldson (1978) calls 'human sense'".
(Katz, 1989: 14)

As part of a project in the preschool years the children would normally make and create things for dramatic play and for display. This could - and should - include woodworking, drawing, cutting, pasting and sticky-taping a multitude of objects, from a multitude of materials and in a multitude of ways. The point is that when making and building, when constructing large and small models, when painting and drawing, a great deal of planning, discussing, conversing have to occur. Much of the conversation should also involve social negotiation and collaboration, which are integral components of any conversation. In case you are wondering what kind of construction activities could occur, the following is an extract from Katz's book: Engaging Children's Minds: the Project Approach; she reports on the ongoing activities of a group of four year olds engaged in an ambulance project:

> "(They) constructed a large ambulance by combining big wooden crates, a discarded piece of staircase, half of an old door, and much cardboard. A steering wheel was added, and an old sheet was sewn to two old broomsticks to provide a stretcher... The ambulance was painted appropriate colours."
> (Katz, 1989:70)

The important point is that the activity required much discussion and some guidance from the teacher. Hopefully the teacher's language was solicitative rather than interrogative or the project may never have evolved.

This leads me on to my final quote, which was not written in 1970, or even in 1980, but in 1990:

> "Our language reflects sexist, male-centred attitudes that perpetuate the trivialization, marginalization, and invisibility of female experience."
> (Sheldon, 1990:4)

The experiences which a young child has socialises them into the society in which they live; all the values, mores, beliefs and ways of confirming in that society are learnt by the young child with varying degrees of success. One of the major ways in which young children are socialised is through language. One of these values is concerned with gender roles. Unfortunately, according to Sheldon (1990) our language is sexist, it reflects male-centred attitudes which in turn tend to ignore female experience at worst, or at best trivialise them, e.g. in books and TV programs - where do we find female characters in abundance who are engaged in important and/or exciting activities? e.g. Language; everyone uses "he" rather than "she" even when we are not sure of the sex. Caregivers say to a mixed group of children in the home corner, "Hey, you guys, what are you doing?"

Sheldon is struggling with the problem of how parents, friends, relatives, teachers, caregivers and advocates can prevent the perpetuation of these sexist values through our language. In other words, to use words that allow the listener to conjure up images of both makes and females undertaking certain roles, behaving in certain ways. This is a salutary lesson which we must remember also as we strive to improve our language interactions with young children.

For those of you who are dismayed by all the research data and confused by the mixed messages I seem to have offered in this paper, I believe our approach to children's language development could be encapsulated in six or seven premises :

What we need are :

1. Teachers and caregivers who understand the links between language, social and intellectual development and the need for all three to be embedded in contexts which are understood by young children;

2. Teachers and caregivers who can talk to, and with children, rather than at them;

3. Teachers and caregivers who can ask soliciting questions rather than interrogatory questions and who can respond appropriately to child-initiated conversation;

4. Teachers and caregivers who will spend time with one child or a small group of children rather than flitting from group to group;

5. Stimulating programs which provide opportunities for flexible use of time; open-ended materials, and dramatic play experiences which may develop into something bigger and more complex;

6. Teachers and caregivers who are conscious of the need to use language in a non-sexist, non-racist manner; and

7. Teachers and caregivers who realise that their role is different from that of parents but that many of the most positive components of "home talk" could be incorporated into their program so that the young child acquires language in a natural way and comes to regard language as a vehicle for enhancing, rather than inhibiting their learning.

If we were to ask the question: "To talk or not to talk?" the answer would be : "Yes if you fulfil all these commitments".

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